

# A Declaration of Dependence

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 | Psalm 19:1-6 | 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a | Luke 4:14-21

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31A

<sup>12</sup> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. <sup>14</sup> Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many members, yet one body. <sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; <sup>24</sup> whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. <sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. <sup>28</sup> And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. <sup>29</sup> Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup> But strive for the greater gifts.

## INTRODUCTION

Twelve days ago, I was fortunate to visit the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia—later called Independence Hall. It was here, in June of 1776, that Thomas Jefferson was appointed, along with four others, to a small working group—cleverly called the Committee of Five—in order to craft a declaration on behalf of the Second Continental Congress.<sup>1</sup> This document was to address a list of 27 grievances held against their British oppressors. In an early draft, Jefferson, wrote:

We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable; that all men are created equal and independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The committee also included Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Rough Draft of the Declaration of Independence,” June 1776, held in the U.S. Library of Congress. It was transcribed and printed in Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson. Volume 1: 1760–1776* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 243–247. The Committee of Five edited Jefferson’s draft which, when it was submitted on July 2, read: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

In this line—even more so than the edited version which might be more familiar to you—Jefferson argued that the collective good is tied to inherent individual rights.<sup>3</sup> That is, freedom for the colonies from a nation 3,500 miles away needed to be enshrined in each person having “sacred and unalienable rights,” including “life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” And in the face of a tyrannical government arguably abusing its people, I suppose that makes sense. But in the last 250 years, we have taken the idea of individual rights and expanded them into a rather impressive array of personal entitlements, which many people now assert at the expense of the whole. Now to be clear, I am *not* arguing against individual freedom in an ultimate sense, nor autonomy, nor independence in the face of oppression, nor intrinsic human dignity. But rather, I wonder if all this focus on individual rights and freedom and independence has pushed us toward where we are now—a society that is remarkably self-absorbed, self-focused, and expects the uncritical affirmation of self. Indeed, I wonder if this focus on individual *independence* has eroded our sense of *dependence* on one another, not self-promotion for my sake, but self-sacrifice for the good of the whole? Does having rights mean we are free from responsibility to and reliance on one another?

Well, in the context of the church, our reading from 1 Corinthians 12 shows us that Paul has something to say on the subject. And it is this: We need each other. We need each other.

### 1. EVERYONE IS TOGETHER (VERSES 12-13)

Let’s take a closer look. The first few lines of our reading are the conclusion to the previous passage, in which Paul was discussing the spiritual gifts—things like wisdom, knowledge, and faith, as well as speaking in tongues or working miracles or prophesying. Paul was dealing with a church that was immensely gifted, but had been, to put it nicely, abusing each other.<sup>4</sup> The letter opens with his plea for them to stop being divisive.<sup>5</sup> By chapter three, he has assessed them as spiritual babies.<sup>6</sup> By chapter 6, he is telling them that it is to their shame they are taking each other to court over trivial things.<sup>7</sup> And by chapter 11, just before our chapter, he points out how they are selfish even at the Lord’s Supper, with some eating and others going hungry, some getting drunk—and Paul concludes that they are better off staying home from church on Sunday.<sup>8</sup> That’s right, the Apostle Paul tells them that no church is better than their church. It’s quite striking.

And so, in our chapter, he’s been telling them that while each has a role to play, they are together as one body. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”<sup>9</sup> No matter your ethnicity or social status, it is one church “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that Jefferson had very few examples of such an expansive declaration of individual rights—arguably just the Magna Carta (1215), the English Bill of Rights (1689), and the French Declaration on the Rights of Man and Citizen.

<sup>4</sup> In Paul’s assessment, they are not lacking in gifts. See 1 Cor 1:7.

<sup>5</sup> See 1 Cor 1:10-17.

<sup>6</sup> See 1 Cor 3:1-3.

<sup>7</sup> See 1 Cor 6:1-8.

<sup>8</sup> See 1 Cor 11:17-34, especially verse 17.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor 12:12.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Cor 12:13.

## 2. EVERYONE IS NECESSARY (VERSES 14-20)

But Paul doesn't stop there. Where that last section emphasized unity, Paul continues to make a point about the variety of spiritual gifts and the variety of people to exercise those gifts, for that unity. And so, while the people of God should be united to one another and to Christ, this does not mean that all Christians should have the exact same spiritual gifts. To make this point, he picks up on that metaphor of the *body* again. He paints here a gruesome picture of handless, eyeless, earless bodies on the one hand, and bodies consisting entirely of eyes or entirely of ears on the other hand. The implication is that a church—like this one in Corinth—that overvalues one set of gifts to the point that those without particular gifts are second class members, is at best a perversion of the way God designed his Church. The effect is serious. It divides the church, making it the worst kind of meritocracy.

Paul could not be clearer. Everyone is necessary. Every part of the body is necessary—hands, eyes, feet—except, maybe, the appendix (which has no positive function, it just sits and does nothing until one day it decides it will cause a massive amount of pain and poison the body).<sup>11</sup> Everyone is needed.

In fact, if there is any group of people who should realize how much we need each other, it should be the Christians. If there is anyone who realizes that we cannot do it on our own, that not one of us is strong enough or talented enough or righteous enough to stand before God, it should be us. This is the very message of the Gospel, that we can stand before God because Jesus stands for us. We are dependent on him, on his taking our place as an atoning sacrifice. This is why Paul can talk about the church as the body of Christ, we are dependent on him and, dependent on each other.

## 3. EVERYONE IS VALUED (21-25)

Over the next few verses, Paul expands this idea. Not only is everyone necessary, everyone is valued. Or at least, they should be.

The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this.<sup>12</sup>

Do you hear the logic? Some parts of the body have inherent honour. They need no additional honour. Some parts do not have inherent honour, and so they must be treated with greater respect to demonstrate their value. In other words, in a church setting, some people are already in the spotlight. Others work behind the scenes. Others do service for the wider community that not everyone sees. Respect and honour ought to be given especially to those people because everyone is valued. Or, again, to put it in terms of our relationship to Jesus Christ: How can we

---

<sup>11</sup> This is a traditional portrayal of the appendix based on historic understanding of the organ. Some more recent research suggests it may function as an important reservoir of gut bacteria.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor 12:21-24.

fail to value one another? How can we devalue one another when we recall that Jesus thought enough of us to give up his life to save us?

#### 4. WHAT KIND OF CHURCH ARE WE?

This brings us back to our basic questions: Are we together? Does everyone belong? Is everyone valued? Or are we more like this Corinthian church of selfish children than we want to be? In short, do we know that we need each other? And what does that even look like? Two thoughts:

First, to put it bluntly, if we require a Christian to look a certain way or to adhere to certain traditions or serve particular functions—apart from the basic things that make us Christians and the particular gifts we actually have to offer—we have become Corinthian—spiritually immature. As Paul goes on to say: Not everyone is a prophet. Not everyone is a teacher. Not everyone has to serve in the same way or even can. And this should be no source of shame or inferiority for anyone in this church. Together we are one body and we need a variety of gifts. This is the way God designed it. If you have a gift, start using it for the good of the whole, for the good of the church. Don't be an appendix.

Second, the other side of the coin—don't let your gifting make you feel superior. Not all the gifts are the same. But all ought to be valued. And we should start by making sure we are respecting and valuing every person in this church body. I get to be up front, speak into this microphone, make you all suffer through my ranting and raving, and even get my name printed in the order of service. No additional honour is necessary—or deserved. But there are a great many people who do an incredible amount of work behind the scenes, from musicians to the kids' church workers to the flower arrangers to people who arrange the sidespersons or the reader to our verger to the cleaner. Do we do a good enough job bestowing respect and honour upon them? I wonder. Do we all even know their names?

In short: Are you using your gift for the common good of God's people? I hope so. Does your lack of a particular gift make you feel inferior? I hope not. Does your particular gift make you feel superior? I hope not. Because, everyone is needed and to be honoured.

#### CONCLUSION

I will finish by taking us back to July 1776. Most Americans celebrate July 4 as the day on which the Declaration of Independence was made official. Interestingly, that is the day that 12 of the 13 colonies voted for it. But it was not ratified until July 15 and signed until August 2. Why? The delegates from New York did not have approval from their convention to vote for it until July 9—typical New Yorkers, always late—and the Continental Congress required unanimous approval.<sup>13</sup> The colonies wanted to act together, in unison. They realised that, in taking on this astonishing commitment to founding a new nation, they needed each other. They would not move forward without each other. May we learn this lesson too—especially in these divisive times, that in Christ and as the body of Christ, we need each other.

---

<sup>13</sup> For an interesting account of the timing, see Ray Raphael, "Was the Declaration of Independence Signed on July 4? How Memory Plays Tricks with History," *Journal of the American Revolution*, October 10, 2017. See [allthingsliberty.com/2017/10/declaration-independence-signed-july-4-memory-plays-tricks-history/](http://allthingsliberty.com/2017/10/declaration-independence-signed-july-4-memory-plays-tricks-history/).

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, we are grateful that your Son has reconciled us to you and to each other in death and resurrection. May we learn to love one another in the way he loves us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*